

DAVID M. BROWN PLANETARIUM
1426 N. Quincy Street
Arlington
Virginia

HABS VA-1440
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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DAVID M. BROWN PLANETARIUM

HABS No. VA-1440

Location: 1426 North Quincy Street, in Arlington County, Virginia.

The coordinates for the Planetarium are 38.8888464N, 77.108758W; these were obtained using Google Earth in August 2010 and, it is assumed, NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Date: The Arlington County School Board obtained a building permit for the planetarium in February 1968, and the structure was completed the following year.¹ The planetarium was designed by the Cleveland, Ohio, based architecture firm of Ward and Schneider, as part of an innovative education center for the county. The center consisted of two buildings, the planetarium and the present-day, Arlington County school board office building behind it. The planetarium was constructed by the builders, Hill and Kimmel. Cost estimates reported in the *Washington Post* for the education center were \$1.5 million dollars.

Architect: Ward and Schneider. The partners in the Cleveland, Ohio, firm were David M. Ward and G. Frederick Schneider. In the 1970 edition of *American Architect's Directory*, Ward responded to the questionnaire and so provided a summary of the firm's practice. At the time they maintained an office in Cleveland and another on Wilson Boulevard in Arlington, the latter likely due to the construction of the education center for the county's public school system. While Arlington's planetarium was a unique building type, it was not the firm's first institutional commission. Other works included Taylor Hall at Kent State University, the Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center at Case Western Reserve University, a high school for Cleveland's public school system, and a public library for Cleveland as well.² The firm also prepared drawings and specifications for several Arlington schools, including additions or alterations to Yorktown and Swanson high schools and Tuckahoe and Monroe Wilson elementary schools and plans for a new school building on Glebe Road.³

¹ In July 1968 another permit was issued; this one was for the parking lot. In November 1982 the county approved repairs to the existing slag roof. For these permits (department of building inspections), see Arlington County Building Department, "House Cards and Street Names," cards on file, Arlington County Historic Preservation Office. See also, "Plans Cited," *Washington Post* 12 February 1967, B4; "Ultra Education Center," *Washington Post* 12 September 1966, D11; "Arlington Plans Ultra Education Center," *Washington Post* 29 August 1966, B2. The planetarium component of the education center was depicted in the round in both of the *Post* images (1966, 1967) but the shape of the dome differed. Copies of the plans (or blueprints?) are held by the school board; thank you to Pam Juhl, Board of Directors, Friends of Arlington's David M. Brown Planetarium, for providing that information. Pam Juhl to Virginia B. Price, electronic communication, 20 August 2011.

² Information about the firm's practice, see the AIA Historical Directory of American Architects at www.aia.org, last accessed 22 August 2011.

³ *Washington Post*, March 1967-February 1970. This suggests the firm had a contractual agreement with the school board.

Significance: Since its construction in the late 1960s, as space exploration captured the imagination of many and as man successfully reached the moon, the planetarium has introduced Arlington's school children to science in innovative ways. Its programming remains popular and its architecture is the best example of neo-expressionism in the county. The free-standing domed concrete building is embraced by the curving office building behind it, and together these buildings project a sculptural quality evocative of the era in which they were erected.

The planetarium was named for Arlingtonian David M. Brown, an astronaut who died in the 2003 space shuttle Columbia disaster.

Sources: Information about the planetarium in the clipping files of the Virginia Room at the public library primarily relates to its programming, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing its role in the school system by day and in the community at night. Specific details about the architecture or even the contract with the architectural firm Ward and Schneider may be in the records of the school board, but were not accessible at the time of the survey. Arlington County's preservation office has copies of the building permits, but the Friends of Arlington's David M. Brown Planetarium provided most of the information as a result of their successful campaign to save the building. See www.saveplanetarium.org, last accessed August 2011.

Historian: Virginia B. Price, 2011.